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AUTHOR: VALLANCE, ZONA

TITLE: REASON IN THE
ETHICAL MOVEMENT.

PLACE: LONDON

DATE: [191-?]

Master Negative #

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BIBLIOGRAPHIC MICROFORM TARGET

Original Material as Filmed - Existing Bibliographic Record

170
Z1 Vallance, Zona
v.3 Reason in the ethical movement, by Zona Vallance.
London [191-?]
8 p. 19 cm in 22 cm.

Reprinted from the Ethical world.
Volume of pamphlets

Restrictions on Use:

TECHNICAL MICROFORM DATA

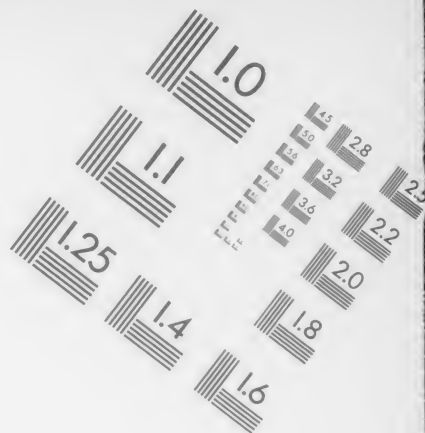
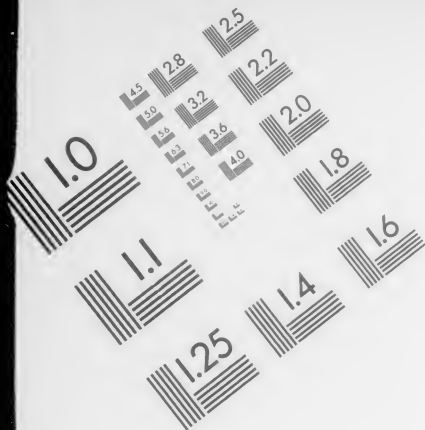
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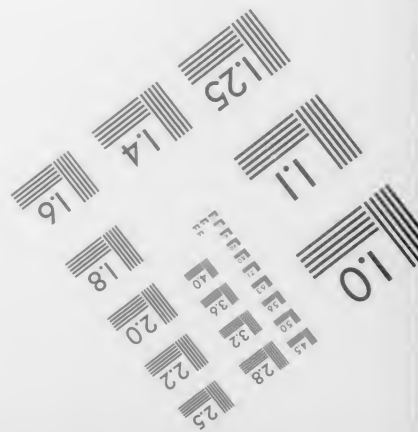
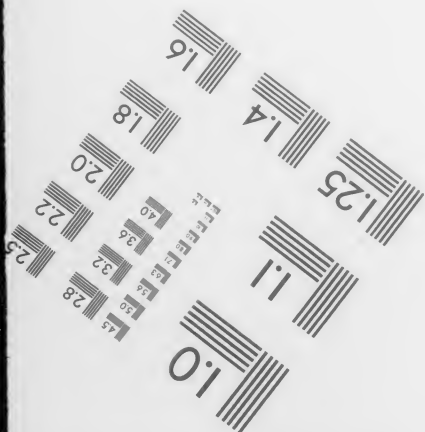
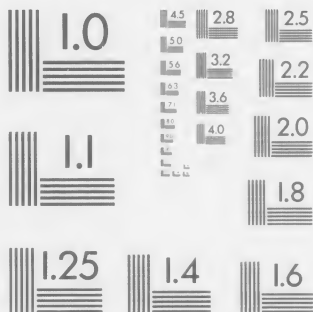
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No. 6

Reason

in the Ethical

Movement. By

Zona Vallance.

Reprinted from

"The Ethical World."

LONDON:
"THE ETHICAL WORLD"
PUBLISHING CO., LIMITED.
17, JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET
STREET, E.C.

One Penny.

REASON IN THE ETHICAL MOVEMENT.

NEW members, still holding to theological beliefs, frequently and rightfully join the Ethical Societies because they accept its fundamental position, that necessity for goodness, and the motives to make it our aim, are quite independent of such beliefs; and at first sight, it may therefore appear that the mere acceptance of this fact is the peculiar characteristic of the movement and the justification for our fellowship. But it is the life of the fellowship, not the conditions of birth into it, that display and test its real nature. Acceptance of the independence of morality is no new thing. It can be claimed as compatible with orthodox belief and theological practice, and we find it nearly two hundred years ago in Bishop Butler's writings.

The peculiar characteristic of Ethical Societies is not this acceptance of independent morality, but the results that follow from making it the bond of a common religious life. It is not even the purpose of our societies—the creation of goodness—which justifies their existence apart from other religious bodies. We have no monopoly of that trust in goodness which seeks to realize the ideal. The aim is conspicuous in all the Churches. The very heaven they crave is but a haven of perfected being.

Nor is it peculiar to an Ethical Society that its members reach the fold *through* the reasoning process. Theological Christians to-day loudly advertise their evidences as the door of entry into their communion. Yet this was not so always. Reason has had to strive for even this amount of recognition by theological religion; for theology started with no conscience and fixed standard. Originally, contradictory gods, creations both of fear and desire, were worshipped in the same place by the same person; or the individual placidly changed his god with his place of abode. The critical faculty slept, because the purpose of religion varied with the

temporary emotion of the tribe or the man; and even when the Hebrew stream of religion had approached to ethical monotheism, the standard was still double, or even triple; for Yahveh was both good and evil, with might as his prevailing quality. Truly, *self-criticism* had gained admittance; but, as we can see in the book of Job, it was confused by this triple standard; and criticism of God himself, criticism of the religious ideal, was the sin characteristic of Satan the Adversary. And is it not so to-day? Is not the critic of the mighty material universe still counted irreligious and impious by many who regard themselves as advanced thinkers? And is not this a bar to real religion?

From one point of view, the evolution of religion has been a process of sect-forming, each formation entailing partial and gradually-increasing acceptance of criticism as religious exercise, but with this acceptance limited by the very nature of authoritative or theological religion, which inevitably erects its dogmatic pale, beyond which criticism, social or individual, may not pass; so that any persons desiring unbounded exercise of reason must be outcast from the membership. And so ingrained has been the conviction that reason is incompatible with a religious ideal that when Secularists constituted a fellowship, with the avowed purpose of criticising all the religious pales and their beyond, not only were they regarded by others as angels of Satan, but they themselves repudiated the title "religious" and the word "sacred."

The peculiar characteristic of the Ethical Fellowships is the thorough recognition that reason is sacred, and that this unbounded exercise of criticism is itself a religious function. Possibly other Ethical members besides myself have sometimes been confronted with the question: "Why do you always speak of the Ethical *Movement*?" To my mind, the use of this word is most significant; for to us religious life *is* movement—spiritual movement. First and foremost, it is the initial movement of the mind, turning away the shifting sand of theological tradition, shaking off the

hypnotism of hero-worship, penetrating beyond the ancient formal moral codes—mere diagrams of religious life—and searching down to the bed-rock of social experience to discover alike the unadulterated moral spring and the true course of the river of life. This sacrificial act is the Ethical Movement of the individual mind; it is our baptism into the fellowship. The full recognition of reasoning as our prime religious exercise is its logical result.

But we aim ultimately at physical as well as at thought movement. That very sense of dependence upon social good deed and thought, which is our motor feeling in coming together, bids us re-create society and exploit the universe to do it; yet here again our corporate hope of achievement is based upon trust in human reason—and this trust, at bottom, is but experience in the oneness of humanity.

In our Movement we no longer depend on one wise man or many, nor on any particular moral or scientific revelation. Nor do we cry to the almighty unknown, either to picture us the perfect society, or to mould it. We apply this method of reason both to paint what we would create, to select the appropriate constructive acts for our own bodies to perform, and to show us how to move our own and other wills to their performance. We are as fully conscious as any Positivist or theologian that feeling, whether called love or faith, is man's motor force, and we co-operate in order to strengthen it; but it no longer seems to us that feeling itself—simple prayerful yearning after good, can, without reason, achieve an inner goodness. No ethical member is loyal to his fellowship who does not bear in mind Plato's dictum: "Wherever our reason like a gale bears us, there we must go"; and, more than this, no ethical member is loyal to his fellowship who does not set this gale a'blowing. Through and through reason is the agency selected by the Ethical Societies as their creative director, and it is the conscious choice of this unresting guide that to my mind makes the Ethical Movement the embodiment of the thought expressed in the old phrase, "Worship in the Spirit."

How is it that for us the exercise of criticism is at last able to become the essential religious function? How is it that we now regard even the criticism of the Ideal itself as the very means to create it? It is because we have at last simplified our religious standard. It is because we would fain set might at the feet of right. It is because we have come clearly to distinguish between a world which ought to be and a world which is; and because we know the brethren are one.

But how, without divine help, shall we prejudiced creatures avoid mistaking our own idiosyncrasies for a part of that world which ought to be?

In theological religion men find their unity expressed in God. They seek completeness and expansion in prayer to him. They see through a glass, darkly, but we face to face. We do but drop the symbol when we come together in moral fellowship. This coming is the recognition of one end for all human lives. The reasoning together as to its details and how to attain it is a recognition of one means. This means, although one in essence, varies in form. The social exercise of reason in Ethical Societies corresponds to the united prayers which theological Christians raise in expectation of light and help from God.

The theological sermon, when consistent with the theological prayer, is simple explanation of divine revelation accompanied by exhortation. But the ethical sermon, or lecture, is no authoritative exhortation. It is both a record of past human experience and again an exercise of that reason which purifies and re-creates. It is a synopsis of solitary thinking expressing and inspiring personal conviction, just because it is, as a whole, and in each phrase, beautified into harmony, proportion, and significance by the reasoning process.* It is itself born of imaginary social discussion; and, possibly, for members as well as for lecturers, this imaginary social discussion is as needful as personal discussion.

* See *Ethical World*, March 26th, p. 200.

If the purpose of our fellowship be the creation of individual and social goodness, our religious exercises, like those of other communities, must be twofold; and first, because most urgent in our daily affairs, must come the criticism of acts of the personal will in relation to the personal ideal. The individual properties of the things to be compared in this kind of criticism necessitate that it be almost always a solitary exercise. Only intimate friends, well aware of our abilities, limitations, and surroundings, can be asked for conscious help; and, in proportion to intensity of self-criticism, we shall often find that intimacy with self shows the need to apply both casual and conscious condemnation or approval in directions quite other than those intended by the outside critic; so that it is generally more serviceable to call up conceptions of the judgments absent friends would make if they knew all that we know, than to trust to their actual incomplete knowledge. Even here then, it is the perpetual imaginative reference to the social reason that actually preserves the integrity of our own individuality. Self-love without this aid and stimulus soon whittles down the personal ideal to suit the actual deed or thought, and soon reduces to a comfortable minimum the discipline reason assigns as the outcome of the criticism.

The other religious exercise is criticism of the personal ideal in relation to the social or moral ideal. The will for self-discipline, and even our mental and physical abilities, vary with the vigour and accuracy of this inward picture of the character and active life which in our given circumstances will best enable us to benefit mankind; therefore, the religion which clings to reason as its essential mark and method of culture must logically decide that the value of the first kind of religious exercise is entirely dependent on the frequency and earnestness of the second. And it is this which gives worth to the Ethical Fellowship as a whole. It bears, indeed, to the members a similar, if modified, relation to that borne by the Roman Catholic Church to its devotees. We choose it as the highest medium of inspiration—in-

breathing—of reason because its members emphasize in the special nature of their united aim the unity of mankind. It is this which makes us feel that, though we may endeavour to compare the personal and the social ideal at home or abroad with the aid of literature, art, lectures, or social intercourse, we can do it to much better effect in our organized meetings; and the same logic shows that this criticism of the personal ideal can be still more systematic and thorough if these meetings are for discussion, in which every person deliberately contributes his best thought and experience for the same temporary as well as permanent end.

Our instruction of the young is based on these same principles. We commend to the public moral lessons for children consisting of systematic analysis and synthesis of the conduct of life, gradually and imaginatively presented day after day by a teacher who sets before him a specified moral end. This also is culture of the personal ideal by discussion; and the teacher offers his exemplification of the true method of religious culture, not simply on account of the value of his particular lesson, but that the children themselves may practise it hereafter. But every good teacher knows that especial care must be taken that all the children in the class accept as their own the purpose for which they assemble. This holds good also in regard to adults; and for this reason *members'* discussion-meetings, as more full of self-surrender, ought to be more fruitful than any in which the casual public take part.

Our prospect of promoting a spiritual movement united enough to reshape society is proportioned to our ultimate success in attaining by disinterested discussion unity in the ideals of the members; and our prospect of creating a movement strong enough to be effective depends on self-discipline in the application of those ideals to our personal spheres of deed and influence. We ignore, if we do not as a body deny, the agency of supernatural grace for the correction and enlargement of these finite ideals. But this is just

because, in coming into the Ethical Movement, we seek the surer cure for individual limitation to be found in social grace; and in it we seek more than this. We look back into the past and round into the present, and we find that the *un*organized or semi-organized reasonings of men, for the most part merely playing unconsciously like children with the phenomena of human existence, have evolved the picture of a moral order which has grandeur and power so to shake the soul and stir the will alike of good and bad men that they deem it magic. If social reason, assisted by comparatively isolated saints and scientists, has spontaneously done this, what far more glorious vision may we slowly shape if we consciously co-operate for the application of this reason to every aspect of human affairs, and if we consecrate life by the attempt to represent the vision in personal conduct? And who can estimate the results if all mankind were ever to participate in such a movement?

Surely discussions with this vital end in the minds of the participants should be recognised as more humbling and more elevating than any prayer meeting. They give promise of a time when ethical lectures, discussions, and other solemnities (for do we not merely await the psychological moment when reason itself shall crystallize into acts of corporate discipline and dedication?) shall be the accepted opening of souls to religious warmth and light; while the business of the nation, and its play also, shall be simply the expenditure of that same warmth and light, blending Church and State into one, in a manner exceeding the dreams of Israel and of Rome. For reason tolerates no partitions in the life of man.

Copies of this pamphlet may be obtained from W. Sanders at Leighton Hall, Leighton Crescent, N.W. Price 1½d. per copy post free; 100 copies post free for 6s. 3d.